OXSCIE –KEYNOTE SESSION (DAY 2)

Social and Cultural Uncertainties: Diversity, Social Change and Education

Ladies and Gentlemen, Distinguished guests :

I am delighted to be speaking to this distinguished audience on a topic that is so important to me both personally and professionally.

First, I would like to congratulate the organizers to have planned such a timely Symposium. I found yesterday's sessions to be tremendously informative and look forward to reviewing the recommendations and papers produced for this week's proceedings. In particular, I commend the Department of Education of Oxford University for its leadership in driving this research agenda. Its scholarship is helping to broaden our understanding of the role education can play in shaping attitudes towards diversity.

It is also important at this time to remember the victims of the acts of violence of the last weeks and to express our solidarity with their families.

As we start this session on social and cultural uncertainties, I would like to read the following statement from Article 1 of the UN Charter.

> "To achieve international cooperation in solving international problems of an economic
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> social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect

for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex

language or religion.".

This was written in 1945, a period of great uncertainty on the aftermath of World War 2. It still

applies in 2017. What followed in the next two years was a period of intense institution building

with the establishment of the WHO, FAO, ILO UNICEF UNESCO and the starting of the World

Bank and IMF operations. This institutional infrastructure has lasted to this day and was both a

preventive and reconstruction response to that period of uncertainty. As we consider this current

period of extensive uncertainty, education is one of the major instruments at our disposal.

I have dedicated part of my career to ensuring that educational institutions and educators are

better equipped to respond to changing social dynamics. And today, as the world we live in

becomes increasingly diverse and societies struggle to accommodate diverse populations, this

theme is paramount. For several years, I have been a Board member of the Global Centre for

Pluralism. At the Centre, we believe that pluralism and education must intersect to inform public

responses to social and cultural uncertainty. In fact, education is one of the pillars of the Centre's

work, alongside analysis and dialogue.

It is through comparative analysis, education and knowledge exchange that the Global Centre for

Pluralism looks to enhance understanding about the choices and actions that support positive

responses to diversity in societies around the world. We were founded through a unique public-

private partnership between His Highness the Aga Khan and the Government of Canada. The

Centre is based in Ottawa and takes inspiration from the Canadian experience. As a multi-ethnic,

multi-cultural country, Canada has developed responses to its diversity that demonstrate a

valuing of human differences. And this work continues in Canada because pluralism is always a

work in progress. This year, 150 years after Confederation, as the country reflects on the progress it has made, frank discussions are underway about how Canada can do better, in particular vis-à-vis its Indigenous peoples. In this regard the 94 Calls to Action that came out of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's report in 2015 require ongoing commitments and reforms across many different sectors. Canada has come a long way but still has much work to do.

Canada is certainly an example of a very diverse society. But all modern societies—from established democracies to fragile states—are diverse in some way. And as global migration intensifies, parts of the world that were once isolated are facing 'the Other' for the first time. Rather than a valued resource, this diversity is more often treated as a liability. Failing to manage diversity can result in exclusionary policies and practices that prevent the full and equal participation of all groups. From the winner-takes-all politics in a number of countries to the rise of anti-immigrant populism in others, anxieties about difference are exploited, further fueling conflict. We need to recognize that countries in proximity of conflict zones face a very different situation and how vital and urgent is the support of the world community.

With anxiety and fear as the backdrop, what can be done? There must be a shift in the way global societies and their leaders approach diversity. Because, *diversity is a fact but pluralism is a deliberate choice*. Pluralism is a normative response to diversity; it requires purposeful decisions and actions from a range of actors that lead to inclusion for all. For example, pluralism involves widening membership in a society by giving citizenship rights to more individuals within a reasonable time frame. It finds multiple ways to assist the new immigrants especially refugees to access the benefits of their new society including access to health, education, housing, language training and facilitating entry into employment. It entails re-imagining national identity to be

more inclusive of those who have not lived in the country for generations. It includes reforming hiring practices to ensure they are not based on what a candidate looks like, where they were born, what they believe, or their gender. A commitment to pluralism leads to lasting mutual benefit and wellbeing – rather than systemic discrimination.

There are many different pathways for promoting pluralism. Pluralism is contextual and each society must find its own path. It must find its own way at making inclusiveness a society project. But all societies have this in common: all societies face disagreements over competing values. These can be intra cultural as well as inter cultural. The difference is that pluralist societies manage these disagreements by seeking compromise and agreeing to live with the consequences. Pluralism therefore is ultimately about making choices: either greater inclusion for the benefit of all or greater exclusion for the benefit of some.

Along the trajectory towards greater inclusion, education is a vital tool. Education has long been recognized as an instrument for social change and social development. Education can shape the outlooks and attitudes of individuals, reorient social relationships, and influence wider social mores. In a rapidly changing and increasingly globalized world, education can help develop in learners a respect for diversity among individuals and groups. By reconciling inequalities, encouraging group cohesion and preparing citizens to negotiate their individual and collective identities, education becomes a tool for easing hostilities among groups.

And "education for pluralism" could not be more essential in the contemporary world. The social and cultural uncertainties faced by societies around the world call into question fundamental issues of the human experience. Our understanding of identity, home, community, and of the

narratives we construct to understand our place in the world are all being unsettled by the rapid pace of globalization.

A curriculum rooted in pluralist values can cultivate self-knowledge and an understanding of diverse perspectives. It can lead to security in one's own self and acceptance of others. Pluralism is a value proposition that asks people to think about themselves and their society in new ways. Education for pluralism impacts society at every level, shaping values, political behavior and social attitudes, as well as providing citizens with the skills and opportunities to fully participate in society.

Fostering an inclusive educational system – and equipping learners to engage productively with people different from themselves – takes deliberate and sustained effort.

What do we know about the impacts of educating for pluralism? We know that children from marginalized or historically disadvantaged groups experience higher levels of dropout, repetition and failure. Inversely, when children feel valued and see their own culture represented in their surrounding environment, their sense of belonging and participation increase. Education can be instrumental in reducing poverty for marginalized groups, but only if the right investments are made. Students must have ready access to teachers and facilities, classroom teaching and curriculum must reflect their own lived experiences, and the school environment must be set up for their success.

We know that active engagement has a strong influence on academic achievement. Fostering educational spaces where each and every child feels comfortable to express themselves and participate actively is an important step in breaking down educational inequities.

We also know that investment in comprehensive programs that include the early childhood and primary years are absolutely necessary for ensuring positive learning outcomes. Compelling research indicates that children express interest in and analyze different racial groups at a very young age. Early exposure to diversity and respect for others allow children to develop a pluralistic mindset at the beginning of their lives.

The available evidence suggests that how children experience diversity in their early years follows them into their upper years and beyond. By the age of nine or ten, children have cognitively established racial and ethnic prejudices.[1] In ethno-culturally diverse but segmented societies, where people of different backgrounds do not routinely interact, addressing diversity with young children is both a challenge and a necessity. As youth move through adolescence, their identities are tested and solidified. Students at this stage can grasp more complex ideas of pluralism and are able to engage with these pluralistic principles in the wider society.

So, what are the levers of change in education to help societies live peacefully with diversity?

Because of the need for a comprehensive approach, the promotion of pluralism through education requires engagement with actors at all levels, including government ministries, teachers' associations, school boards, universities, as well as policy makers, teacher educators, school administrators, teachers, parents and students. Civil society organizations and the business sector when engaged can play an important role.

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[1] Social Studies for Early Childhood and Elementary Schools – NCSS Report, June 1988

The challenge will be to equip practitioners and policy makers with the skills and tools to navigate diversity issues in their particular context. Context-appropriate responses must be generated across several entry points – or levers of change. These levers are:

- Education policy and frameworks

- Pedagogy and teacher training

- Curriculum

- Whole-school environments

- Research

- Extra and co-curricular activities

I would like to leave you with a few final thoughts – and questions – to consider for each of these levers of change and to remind ourselves of the power of IT in establishing networks to jointly develop and share curriculum, learning tools and research.

Education policy and governance

Educating for pluralism will require Government leadership since education is most often a responsibility of governments. Governments can provide direction, support and guidance to the education sector to integrate a focus on pluralism. Policy makers can offer support by placing the state's education goals within a wider policy framework, enabling connections with other policy fields. Governments cannot work in isolation. They need to seek the participation of the education community as policies and educational frameworks are revised. Teachers and Educational Administrators need to offer their best proposals with or without an invitation.

Pedagogy: teaching pluralism

A focus on teachers and their training will be essential for advancing pluralism in education and Faculties of Education have a central role to play. Considering that each year Faculties of Education will graduate enough graduates to teach millions of children and youth around the world. More attention should be given to these institutions.

Teachers require the skills to respond to children from all backgrounds by showing an understanding of their history, values and faiths, as well as to engage students in genuine exchange and critical thinking about real-world issues. Students are often conflicted between the school and home expectations, hence the important role that teachers can play. The evidence to date suggests that a strong self-awareness and ability to examine their own prejudices, biases and assumptions is essential for teaching pluralism.

Where diversity is associated with division or conflict, what additional skills might teachers require? What strategies may be needed to overcome teachers' entrenched attitudes and resistance to change?

Curriculum: learning pluralism

Our world's growing diversity has challenged us to think creatively about how and what we are teaching our children and youth. Pluralism can be learned and reinforced in each year of schooling and integrated into curriculum in a cross-curricular format.

Utilizing every course including math and science to stimulate curiosity, researching divergent perspectives, debating historical narratives from different points of view promote skills that will build 'pluralistic' habits of mind in students.

Whole school environments – Pluralism can be reflected in the school vision and development plan – and embedded in school policies such as admissions, hiring and behavior management.

The physical environment can be an important aspect of creating a shared sense of community and promoting inclusion and pluralism.

Research

As new bodies of research are developed we need to find additional ways to share the results while also finding new ways of collaborating between researchers to expand the scope and extent of issues being studied.

Extra- and co-curricular activities and broader school-community relations

Schools function as one of the initial meeting places for peoples of different cultures. It is important therefore that schools function as welcoming and nurturing environments. Evidence suggests that students learn as much from the dynamics of a place as they do from their studies.

Extracurricular activities can provide students with opportunities to engage with people different from themselves in various ways, thus allowing them to negotiate their different experiences, develop social skills and build an understanding of real-world issues.

I would like to share two examples to illustrate this point to add to your own experiences.

The Aga Khan Museum in Toronto has a special program for students and teachers for example showing teachers how to use Museum objects to encourage student-led exploration through inquiry-based learning. In 2017 alone 3,789 students and 449 teachers have already participated.

I encourage you to visit the Museum's website for more information.

https://www.agakhanmuseum.org/

My second example concerns how a few people in the Ottawa community in Canada established what is now called OrKidstra. This is very successful after school music program bringing

together youth from disadvantaged and varied backgrounds to learn music and become a member of this orchestra. These young people were previously dropping out of secondary school or did not go on to post secondary learning. After 10 years, this highly diverse group of 500 children graduate and go on to University and College. In addition this is a great orchestra adding more musical capacity to this community.

To conclude, I would like to bring us back to the central objective: for education to prepare learners to encounter the diversity in their societies in respectful and productive ways. This is essential given the world we live in today and our shared desire for peace, stability and security.